

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR NASA SCIENCE HEARING
March 2, 2006

I want to welcome everyone here this morning to our hearing on what is probably the most controversial and problematic aspect of NASA's proposed fiscal 2007 budget – funding for its Science Mission Directorate. This morning's hearing is the first time that leading scientists and NASA have been together to have a public discussion of the proposed budget and its potential impacts.

And we have before us today the perfect panel for that discussion – the head of NASA science and representatives of each of the four decadal surveys in which scientists agreed on a list of priorities for NASA funding. This is exactly the kind of interaction the Science Committee was created to foster.

And our goal here this morning is to have a genuine conversation. I want to encourage as much give-and-take among the panel as possible; we've brought you together to hear not only what you have to say to us, but what you have to say to each other. So I encourage you to engage your fellow panelists and to raise issues that you want each other to address. The model here is the hearing we had on the Hubble servicing mission, which I'm sure Dr. Taylor remembers well – and fondly, I hope.

That's not to say that we don't have plenty of questions of our own. We want to understand exactly what is at stake if we reduce funding for science as NASA has proposed. Let me emphasize that I'm not just talking about hearing what's cancelled or deferred; we need to know why doing something a few years later would make a difference.

But perhaps most important, we need to hear whether, given the proposed level of funding, NASA has made the right choices about what to cancel or defer. In the written testimony, all four of our non-NASA witnesses indicate that NASA has gotten it wrong by trying to preserve flagship missions while cutting smaller missions and research grants because of the impact that will have on retaining and attracting scientists to the field. I want to pursue that issue thoroughly. Both NASA and the Congress need to have a better understanding of how to balance whatever cuts are made to ensure the future of space science and earth science.

My goal today is to have an in-depth, informed discussion on the particulars of what NASA has proposed and of what research scientists are pursuing, not just to hear that everyone would like more money. I think we can stipulate that every person on the panel, including Dr. Cleave, would like to see more money for science. What we need to understand is what would be lost if more money does not go to science and, again, even more importantly what we should do if more money is not available or if only a little more money is available. That's what will make this hearing valuable and enable it to move our decision-making process forward.

I say that as a strong supporter of NASA's science programs. I have laid out my position pretty clearly in the past few weeks, so I won't take much time to do so again now. Let me just say that I see science as the most successful aspect of NASA, one that expands the human mind, excites students, pushes technology, provides vital information about our own planet, and helps make the U.S. a world leader. I want to do everything in my power to protect NASA science. But to do so, what I need this morning is information, not rhetoric.

We have before us a sort of “dream team” for that purpose. And I look forward to hearing from all of you. Mr. Gordon.